19th CENTURY RAILROAD POSTAL MARKINGS RELATED TO STEUBEN, SCHUYLER, CHEMUNG AND TIOGA COUNTIES, NY

Before the introduction of railways in the United States around 1830, mail was handled by stage, postriders or boat. It took several years for the Post Office Department to recognize the potential of railroads for transporting mail. The first direct contract between the Post Office Department and a railroad was in December 1837.

Handling of mail on trains necessitated the service of an employee to receive and deliver mail at stations. These employees were known as Route Agents. The first ones were railway employees but within a short time they became employees of the Post Office Department, travelling regular routes. Route Agents cancelled mail received from stations or on the train in uncancelled condition but did not sort mail destined for the final terminal or beyond.

Railway Post Office service was introduced on a trial basis in 1862 and became firmly established by the mid-1870's. A Railway Post Office was a definite operating mail run from terminal to terminal, staffed by one or more railway postal clerks, and sorting mail received from original terminal, and from way points, for local distribution at the final terminal, for connecting lines, or for points beyond the final terminal. All routes had postmark devices for use of clerks handling mail.

Route Agents continued for many years after RPO's were established. In many cases, for reasons of economy, RPO's reverted to Route Agent status for various periods and were later reestablished. Although officially eliminated by the Postmaster General on August 1, 1882, route agent handstamps continued in use as late as 1913.

A third major category of railroad postal marking was that of the Local Mail Agent, later known as Transfer Clerk. This was a post office employee stationed at a railroad junction point to receive and deliver mail between the different railroads as well as the local post office. This clerk cancelled mail posted at railroad station mailboxes or received by the clerk in uncancelled condition.

This exhibit traces the growth of railroad mail service in the New York counties of Steuben, Schuyler, Chemung and Tioga beginning with the 1840's and continuing to the end of the 19th century. Elmira was an important railroad junction even before the Civil War and by 1900 there were four trunk lines servicing Chemung County and its neighbors.

(The text for this title page was adapted from "Railroad Postmarks of the United States 1861-1886" by Charles L. Towle and Henry A. Meyer).